

CHINESE CHARACTERS

- a. 羅樓
- b. 阿耨尼達多
- c. 阿提目多
- d. 阿梨瑟吒
- e. 安伽陀
- f. 伊濕波羅
- g. 鬱多羅提舍
- h. 迦那迦牟尼
- i. 尸梨沙
- j. 彌絺羅
- k. 波吒利弗多羅
- l. 虛夷
- m. 波旬
- n. 育多伽
- o. 相應經
- p. 隨葉
- q. 阿濕卑
- r. 頸鞞
- s. 善現
- t. 善自在

THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY IN EARLY BUDDHISM

One of the main features of the early Indian civilization, repeatedly emphasized by scholars and also serving as a riddle for them for a long time, is the absence of any historical writings 'in the strict sense of the word'. There has been a general tendency to believe that the Indians had no history until the Greek historians taught them how to mark off historical periods by dates and to trace consequences to causes and so transform poetical and mythical accounts of the Indian past into histories. The lack of interest in handing down historical information is sometimes attributed to the ways of Hindu thinking, especially to the dominant theme of *nirvāṇa* which is said to advocate the unreality of the space-time bound empirical world. This argument, though it may be valid in the context of the early Hindu thought, cannot be used to explain the lack of interest in historiography in the earliest Buddhist tradition, for early Buddhism did not emphasize the unreality of the empirical world of space, time and causation.

Yet, the earliest historical literature in the Buddhist tradition, nay, even within the realm of South Asian culture, came into existence in Sri Lanka and goes back only to the fourth century A.D. which is the period during which the oldest extant Pali chronicle, the *Dīpavaṃsa*, assumed its present form.¹ During the next century the *Dīpavaṃsa* was followed by the more systematic chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa*. Heinz Bechert who examined the beginnings of Buddhist historiography has devoted himself to the task of 'searching for the motivation of the earliest historiographers instead of trying to explain the non-existence of an early Indian historical literature.'² In the following pages I propose to examine the reasons for the absence of historical records 'in the strict sense of the term' in the early Buddhist tradition, even though that tradition did not adopt the traditional Hindu outlook regarding the empirical world.

Although there is ample literary evidence to show that history was studied during the pre-Buddhist period as an independent discipline, at least in the Brahmanical schools, no one knows for

certain the nature and scope of this discipline. References to the study of history are found in some of the earliest literary documents where it is referred to as *aitihya*³ or *itihāsa*.⁴ If so, the reason for the non-appearance of history, as conceived and studied in the West, at least in the early Buddhist tradition calls for a careful scrutiny. The philosophy of history in early Buddhism would undoubtedly provide valuable information regarding the non-appearance of such historical studies.

A brief statement about the different philosophies of history in the Western world would be useful in our analysis of the early Buddhist philosophy of history, especially in view of the fact that history 'in the strict sense of the word' is said to be found only in the West.

Philosophy of history in the Western world can be divided broadly into two as speculative and critical. Of these, the speculative philosophy of history has been the more dominant one. It is based on the recognition of an Absolute of one form or another such as Plato's Form, the medieval Christian notion of God, or Hegel's Spirit. The explanation of history as the unfolding of an Absolute is most evident in the Judaic and Christian tradition where the orderliness of historical cycles is perceived as the redemptive activity of God, the *locus classicus* of such a view being St. Augustine's *City of God*. The nineteenth century witnessed the culmination of this speculative trend with the writings of G.W.F. Hegel, especially his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, where he declared 'the theme of history to be the actualization of the Absolute in time, the self-development of Spirit itself, through the careers of a number of world historical peoples'.⁵ It is possible to maintain that even some of the positivist philosophers of that century, like Auguste Comte and Karl Marx, could not remain immune to the influence of such a view, primarily because of their conception of a law-governed universe. These views have undoubtedly left lasting impressions on the conception of history during the twentieth century.

The second dominant theme in the philosophy of history in the West is said to have been initiated by David Hume and came to be known as the critical philosophy. Hume's famous argument against miracles, which is based upon the non-recognition of a uniformity independent of human imagination, seems to have

influenced the view that historical explanation is a value-laden discipline. The speculative view of history, in this view, turns out to be a mere psychological description of the activities of the historians. It is based primarily upon metaphysical presuppositions which are not proved in terms of human experience. The critical philosophers of history, therefore, assumed their task to be merely a clarification of the conceptual structure of historical thinking.

It will become evident from the following analysis that the Buddha probably would be in *agreement* with the critical philosophers of history when he, after rejecting the metaphysical assumptions similar to those presented by the speculative philosophers, recognized that history *could be* a value-laden discipline. Yet, he would be in *disagreement* with them for confining the study of history to a mere clarification of concepts. Buddha's agreement with the critical philosophers is clearly represented in the way he treated 'views regarding the past' (*pubbantānu-ditṭhi*), while his disagreement is reflected in his recognition of the importance of 'knowledge of the past' (*pubbante nāṇa*) for the successful conduct of man's day-to-day life as well as the successful achievement of the goal of the religious life. The clarification of the distinction between 'views regarding the past' and 'knowledge of the past' would, therefore, not only provide a clear estimate of the Buddha's philosophy of history, but also explain the non-appearance of historical studies in the early Buddhist tradition.

'Views' (*ditṭhi*), according to the Buddha, are products of human dispositions (*saṅkhata*) or of intentions (*pakappita*).⁶ Human dispositions or intentions are, for the most part, determined by excessive attachment (*rāga*) or aversion (*dosa*) or confusion (*moha*),⁷ while some are not so determined. Views, whether they be right (*sammā*) or wrong (*micchā*), are therefore evaluative in character. The evaluative character of views regarding the past, which is the result of their determination in terms of dispositions, may also become a necessary character because, in the formulation of views regarding the past, there is a need to fill in gaps for which evidence is not forthcoming from the reservoir of experience. Prompted by a lack of complete information regarding the past, and motivated by a desire to maintain

one's identity, those who presented 'views' regarding the past (*pubbantakappikā*, lit. 'those who constructed the past') have, according to the Buddha, raised the following questions:

- Did we exist in the past?
- Did we not exist in the past?
- What were we in the past?
- In what condition did we exist in the past?
- Having been what, what did we come to be in the past?⁸

Those who raised these questions were also the authors of meta-physical views (*adhivuttipadāni*) of various types, such as, for example:

- The self and the world are eternal; this indeed is the truth, all else is false.
- The self and the world are not eternal; this indeed is the truth, all else is false.
- Etc. etc.⁹

Buddha's analysis of the epistemological problems involved is beautifully summed up in the following passage from the *Majjhima-nikāya*:

'Monks, as for those recluses and brahmins who speak thus and are of this view: "Self and the world are eternal, this indeed is the truth, all else is false"—this situation cannot occur that, apart from faith, apart from inclination, apart from tradition, apart from consideration of form, and apart from predilection for some view, they have personal knowledge, thoroughly pure and thoroughly cleansed. In the absence of such personal knowledge, thoroughly pure and thoroughly cleansed, even that mere fraction of knowledge that these worthy recluses and brahmins thoroughly cleanse, even that is pointed out as grasping on their part. Knowing that what is dispositionally constructed is coarse and that there is cessation of dispositions, the enlightened one, seeing escape from it, has freed himself from it'.¹⁰

The implication of this passage seems clear enough. It is recognized that regarding the past we can have at least a *fraction*

of knowledge (*ñāṇabhāgamattam*), thoroughly pure and cleansed, i.e. without any intentional distortion. Yet, our dispositional tendencies in terms of which we try to fill in gaps, etc. could lead to views which are coarse or rough (*oḷārika*) and the finer distinctions we need to make are lost on the way. The result is dogmatism. Buddha here does not claim that he 'knows everything', but merely points out the dangers involved in coming to rather dogmatic conclusions on the basis of inadequate evidence. Having realized such dangers, he remains free from such meta-physical constructions. Thus, the absolute frame of reference in terms of which historical experience is explained will be found to be a product of human disposition and not part of how things have come to be (*yathābhūta*). This seems to be a clear rejection of the most significant feature of the speculative philosophy of history.

The criticism and rejection of an absolute frame of reference does not mean the rejection of historical experience as such. 'The baby need not be emptied with the bath'. Hence the Buddha's recognition of the value of historical knowledge. Once an ascetic by name Sakuludāyi reported to the Buddha about the leader of the Jaina sect, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, who claimed omniscience (*sabbāññutā*) and yet failed to answer questions regarding the past satisfactorily.¹¹ Buddha's advice to him was that he should leave alone such speculations regarding the past and the future and understand things in terms of causation or dependence, which the Buddha sets out in the following formula:

'When this exists, that comes to be; on the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases'.¹²

Unfortunately, Sakuludāyi was not able to appreciate the significance of this explanation and insists upon a recognition of an 'ultimate state' (*paramo vaṇṇo*) in terms of which everything else could be explained.¹³ In order to ridicule him, the Buddha utilized the famous simile of a man who is in love with a 'beauty-queen' (*janapadakalyāṇī*) whom he has never seen.¹⁴

Thus, the Buddha, considering the limitations of human experience and, therefore, of human understanding, posited neither an absolute frame of reference nor an ultimate first cause

in order to explain historical experience. For him, the beginning of the world process is 'inconceivable' (*anamataṅga*) since the prior end is not manifest (*pubbā koṭi na paññāyati*).¹⁵ On the basis of whatever experience man has it is possible to indicate a process of dissolution (*saṃvaṭṭa*) and evolution (*vivaṭṭa*) operating in the world.¹⁶ Yet this continuous process of dissolution and evolution is not indicative of an Absolute unfolding itself, as it was understood in the speculative tradition in the West. This notion of a process of dissolution and evolution, when utilized to explain cosmic events, is merely an extension of the knowledge gained by the experience of individual phenomenal events; hence an inductive generalization.

A word about the Buddha's theory of knowledge and how it differs from those of the critical philosophers like David Hume may throw further light on the distinction between their conceptions of history.

It becomes very clear from the early discourses that the Buddha was not very sympathetic to ontological speculations regarding 'Being' or 'Thing-in-Itself'. Historical understanding of 'being' or 'existence' (*bhava*) was of extreme importance for him. For this reason, the best form of knowledge was 'knowledge of things as they have come to be' (*yathābhūtañāṇa*), not 'knowledge of things as they are' isolated from the background. Knowledge of things as they have come to be would involve the past as well as present events conditioned by the past. In the case of Hume, human experience is primarily confined to impressions, the ideas being replicas or images of these impressions. A 'perfect idea', for him, is an idea of imagination far removed even from memory in terms of its vivacity.¹⁷ One such perfect idea of imagination is causal relation.¹⁸ Therefore, for Hume, what is given to human experience is a continuous series of discrete events, the human imagination providing the connecting links. On the contrary, the Buddha recognized the ability on the part of man to know things as they have come to be (*yathābhūta*), thereby emphasizing the possibility of historical or contextual understanding of events or phenomena. Such an understanding would be facilitated if memory constitutes an important component of experience. Assuming the very close relationship between sense impressions and memory, a relationship recognized

even by Hume,¹⁹ the Buddha not only counted memory as an important component of experiential knowledge, but at times accepted memory alone as providing factual knowledge, as in the case of retrocognition or knowledge of past births (*pubbenivāsānussati*), one of the higher knowledges (*abhiññā*), which is based entirely upon one's memory (*satānusārt*).²⁰ Therefore, for the Buddha, causal connections are not the work of imagination, but are part and parcel of knowledge by experience, which includes memory. This knowledge is called 'knowledge of phenomena' (*dharmā ñāṇa*);²¹ 'phenomena' being further defined as 'become' (*bhūta*), 'dispositionally determined' (*saṅkhata*) and 'causally conditioned or dependently arisen' (*paṭiccasamuppanna*).²² There need not be any doubt about the significance of the use of past participial forms in the above context. It explains why the Buddha presented causation or dependent arising as the corner-stone of his teaching, boldly declaring: 'He who sees *paṭiccasamuppāda*, he also sees the *dharmā*'.²³

When causation of individual events becomes part of the experiential process, causal uniformity which explains the forgotten past and the unknown future receives more credibility than is accorded to it by David Hume and his followers in the analytical or critical tradition. It is for this reason that the Buddha, having rejected the notion of a first cause as well as an absolute frame of reference, two conceptions peculiar to the speculative philosophers of history in the West and those Indian thinkers who attempted to construct the past (*pubbantakappikā*), provided a causal account of historical events.

The causal principle (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) formulated by the Buddha which was verified in the light of 'knowledge of things as they have come to be' (*yathābhūtañāṇa*) cannot, therefore, be interpreted as an absolute inviolable law (*niyati*). An unprejudiced knowledge of the recent past enabled the Buddha to make the assertion that 'whether the Tathāgatas arise in this world or not, this element, this causal status, this causal orderliness, this conditionality, *has remained*'.²⁴ And a similar unprejudiced inference (*anvaye ñāṇa*)²⁵ enabled him to make the inductive generalization that this may be valid in the future too. It is such an inductive generalization that is embodied in Buddha's conception of a causal uniformity (*dharmatā*).²⁶

The conception of causation as well as causal uniformity enabled the Buddha to explain the past, present and future events and their relationships without resorting to a notion of substance (*ātman*). It is a radical theory of no-soul or no-substance (*anattā*), not a relative theory presented in the background of an ultimate framework or an absolutely real self (*Ātman, Brahman*). Nirvāṇa or freedom, which was understood in an absolute sense during the pre-Buddhist period, therefore, turns out to be primarily a freedom from attachment (*rāga*), aversion (*dosa*) and confusion (*moha*). It is not a state that transcends causation, but accounted for in the statement of causation, where the negative aspect is stated as: 'When this does not exist, that does not come to be; on the cessation of this, that ceases'.²⁷ In short, it is a mere pacification of dispositional tendencies (*saṅkhārasamatha*).²⁸

When dispositional tendencies are reduced to a minimum as a result of the complete elimination of the three roots of evil: attachment, aversion and confusion, a saint refrains from constructing metaphysical theories regarding both past and future. Therefore, according to the Buddha, one who knows things as they have come to be should not run after the past (*pubbantam na paṭidhāveyyātha*), thinking: 'Did I exist in the past?', etc., or have longing for the future (*aparantam na ādhāveyyātha*), saying: 'Will I exist in the future? etc.'²⁹ On the basis of a clear understanding of whatever can be known of the past (*pubbante nāṇa*), the saint eliminates the causes that lead to suffering in the present and remains unmoved even by the greatest calamity that can befall man in the future, namely, death. The manner in which the Buddha faced death, as reported by one of his immediate disciples, Anuruddha, bears ample testimony to this kind of achievement. Says Anuruddha:

'When he who from all craving want was free,
Who to nirvana's tranquil state had reached,
When the great sage finished his span of life,
No gasping struggle vexed that steadfast heart.

All resolute, and with unshaken mind,
He calmly triumphed o'er the pain of death.
E'en as a bright flame dies away, so was
the last emancipation of his heart'.³⁰

Sāriputta, another disciple of the Buddha, expresses a similar determination in most poignant terms:

'Not fain am I to die nor yet to live.
I shall lay down this mortal frame anon
With mind alert and consciousness controlled.

With thought of death I dally not, nor yet
Delight in living. I await the hour
Like any hireling, who hath done his task'.³¹

It is therefore clear that the adoption of a transcendentalist view of the world is not the sole reason for the non-appearance of a conception of history similar to the one found in the West. Even a non-transcendentalist or non-absolutist system of thought like early Buddhism, while recognizing the importance of historical experience, refrained from subscribing to a speculative philosophy of history and this was prompted by both epistemological and pragmatic reasons.

HAWAII

DAVID J. KALUPAHANA

Notes

- 1 Walpola Rahula, *History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Colombo: M. D. Gunasena, 1956, p. xxi.
- 2 'Beginnings in Buddhist Historiography' in *Religion and Legitimation of Power in Sri Lanka*, ed. Bardwell L. Smith, Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: Concocheague Associates (Anima Books), 1978, p. 4.
- 3 *Taittirīya Āraṇyaka* 1. 2. 1.
- 4 *Maitrī Upaniṣad* 6. 33; D I 88; A I 163; III 223; Sn 447; 1020.
- 5 See W. H. Dray, 'Philosophy of History' in *The Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards, New York and London: Macmillan, 1967, 6.521.
- 6 Sn 784.
- 7 S IV 359, where *asaṅkhata* is defined as *rāgakkhaya*, *dosakkhaya* and *mohakkhaya*.
- 8 M I 265.
- 9 M II 233.
- 10 M II 234.
- 11 M II 31.
- 12 M II 32.
- 13 M II 32.

- 14 M II 33.
- 15 S II 178.
- 16 D III 84.
- 17 *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1889, p. 8.
- 18 *ibid.*, pp. 10–11.
- 19 *ibid.*, p. 9.
- 20 D III 134.
- 21 S II 58.
- 22 S II 26; 48.
- 23 M I 190–91.
- 24 S II 25.
- 25 S II 58.
- 26 M I 320; 324 etc.
- 27 S II 1 foll.
- 28 M I 167.
- 29 M I 264–65.
- 30 D II 157, translation by T. W. Rhys Davids.
- 31 Th 1002–3, translation by C. A. F. Rhys Davids.

THE GĀRAVASUTTA OF THE SAṂYUTTANIKĀYA AND ITS MAHĀYĀNIST DEVELOPMENTS

This small Sutta deals with the veneration (*gāraṇa*) in which the Buddha held the Dharma, the doctrine which he had discovered on the night of his enlightenment and which he had chosen as his teacher. This text throws some light on the nature of the Buddha and the Dharma as they were conceived by the first Buddhists.

Shortly after his enlightenment, the Buddha Śākyamuni was in Uruvelā, on the bank of the River Nerañjarā, under the Goat-herd's Banyan. Absorbed in meditation, he began to reflect: 'It is not good to live without respect or veneration for a teacher; if there exists a religious or a brahman in the world who is superior to me, I would like to take him as my teacher, to honour and serve him'. With his divine eye he surveyed the triple world, but he saw no-one who surpassed him. Consequently he resolved to attach himself to the Dharma he had discovered a few days previously. In the world of subtle form, the god Brahmā Sahampati had read the Buddha's thought; he immediately descended from his heaven and went to congratulate the Blessed One: 'Noble lord', he said to him, 'in the past, the present and the future, all the perfectly enlightened holy ones attach themselves to the Dharma in order to honour and serve it'. Then, having uttered some stanzas, Brahmā returned to his paradise.

The Indian exegetists do not understand in the same way the doctrinal significance of this Dharma chosen as a teacher, and the *Gāraṇasutta* which refers to it has been the subject of two interpretations, which are divergent if not opposed: a Sthaviravādin interpretation professed by the Buddha's first disciples, and a Mahāyānist interpretation proposed by the adherents of the Great Vehicle.

Sthaviravādin interpretation of the Gāraṇasutta

The *Gāraṇasutta* is represented by four sources designated here by the abbreviations A B C D: